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James Lane Allen: His Art, His Humanity

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The spirit of literature is intuitive in every nation. In the nuclear tribe some Jubal invariably arises to harp the war chant and then the paeans of victory. National development is accompanied by a corresponding literary advancement; but it is only after centuries that a people produces literature in its narrower sense, since the temperament of a primitive people is always spontaneous and emotional, and since literature is but the reflection of the national mind it is only natural that elementary literature should be lyrical. The language of thought, however is prose, and this is always late in development. Early prose was the product of superstition and fancy and apt to be fabulous in nature, but the first really literary prose was didactic. Chronicles, sermons and philosophical treatises, these three made up the bulk of writing.

Literary work advances with mind. The time of Elizabeth was marked by marvelous life in intellect and spirit, which indeed ran riot in succeeding years and had to be checked and forged in eighteenth century formality. But later in the second

creative period the ironclad and rigorous rules of the old school were made to withstand the iconoclastic fury of the dawning nineteenth century. The old régime was fated. Nothing that was unsympathetic with the rampant idea of liberty could endure. Classicism perished because it violated the spirit of freedom. Absolutism was doomed in church, in state, in literature.

Prose experienced a most radical change. New forms were added; old forms, given a new purpose. The novel, the outgrowth of the Elizabethan romance and heretofore a mere detailed recital of events, became the popular literary form for inculcating opinions and knowledge in general. Its scope had widened to embrace every form of mental activity. With this came an imperative demand for specialism, brevity and simplicity. To meet these demands the short story has been developed. Complexity may be for the patient student, but is not countenanced by the casual reader. The short story most easily and most endearingly enters the busy life of this century.

But the time also asks for beauty hence high artistic quality is an important requirement in the story thus shortened, - unity of high order, that is, maintained with variety, proportion and harmony of parts; choice diction, elegance and polish of execution, together with an air of freshness and brightness in tone which shall impress sincerity of purpose. The age will not tolerate falsity or fooling. This sincerity, with proper largeness of comprehension, gives the universality which is the best of genius and is the last requirement of our new form in prose. Humanity loves to find itself portrayed. The narrative must leave local bounds and settings and apply to all men in all times or it will not endure.

Of the present day writers none appreciate or meet these demands more nearly than James Lane Allen, the gifted Kentuckian. His stories are of absorbing interest and show marked ability and scholarly as well as broadly human treatment. His literary talents and his skill in making them seem unaffected combine to make him one of the foremost writers of the day. As we read

he seems no wit superior to ourselves, either in human or literary qualities, and his stories seem but natural living and growing before our eyes. His art is perfect because it so filled form with eternal powers of life that all things, living and dead reflect back to us our own truest thoughts and feelings.

One of James Lane Allen's first volumes, and the one which brought him into prominence as a writer of short stories is "Flute and Violin," a charming collection of six Kentucky tales. The first one, the one which gives title to the book, is probably the most delightful yet written by Allen, and will serve to illustrate some of the qualities, which mark him as a man of genius; whose mission is not to Kentuckians alone, nor yet to the present century but to the universal world-heart.

In mechanical execution this story seems faultless. The diction is perfect. Though the words are chosen with much care yet they seem inevitable. There is an entire lack of studied effect. What a picture of contentment is this:—

"His whole face was overspread with a shade of ecstatic peace."

How true this would be of a philosopher:-

"The older he grew the more patient and dreamy his gray eyes."

And well might the lad know his mother by:-

"the patient sweetness of her smile."

Note the beautiful precision of such words as "wind-splitting fuse" and "hinges-tortured."

In this story, as in all her generally, the emotional quality is predominant, but clearness and correctness everywhere enhance the force of pathos or humor. Read for instance the story of David before the picture in the museum, where simple directness forcibly impresses the lesson of conscience, wholly without effort to impress, as far as any device can be observed. Or the story of Dolorosa who, with veil less head and torn dress, came staggering back to the convent from the bed side of her lover, whose summons she had answered, in spite of her vows and the struggle between love and duty. Or again notice the dissolute grave-digger, the butt of the town, despised alike by low and high; yet notwithstanding all these rebuffs, charitable enough to bury the dead, when all others had fled the plague-stricken city, toiling early and late, sleeping in half-made

graves, wearing out body and soul for those whose only greeting had been a sneer. Or lastly the unrequited love of Jessica, who, when the way was clear, built a mansion, planned magnificent grounds and furnished lavishly a room, and then wrote for John Gray to come, only to find out that he was married and that hence forth she must abide alone, which thing she did, being true to the last.

For example of humor take the following: The story of the carpenter's pet coon, which descended Mrs. Walter's chimney and then started to dig a burrow in that ladys feather bed amid the vengeful shrieks of the landlady, and the admiring plaudits of the maid, the carpenter's sweetheart. Or Peter's fantastic coat, on the skirt of which were embroidered all that negro's favorite texts, to be ornamental as well as close at hand. Or again the marvelous story of the Mastoon Maximus, told by the servants at the instigation of Adam, for the purpose of frightening away the sewing-girl who was coming in answer to a note meant for Georgiana. Or the accounting for the deposit of prehistoric bones by the assertion that it was there Noah swept out the ark.

But perfect simplicity is everywhere. Nothing could be more beautifully child-like than the character and life of the parson in "Flute and Violin". Absolutely unselfish and unostentatious, he appeals to every heart. The friendship of the plain but kindly old negress for the dissolute vagrant in "King Solomon" is worthy our dreams of the social conditions of the Millenium. But not his characters alone show this mark. The whole story of the red-bird as found in "Kentucky Cardinal" and "Aftermath" is delightful in its beautiful simplicity. As both intellect and spirit are sensitive to beauty the transparent clearness and simplicity but emphasize the rivel of spirit to spirit. Music and color blend everywhere into charm and his vivid descriptions appeal to the senses no less than to the reason in imagination. This is the way he describes the parson's dancing. "He began to tread the mazes of the minuet about the room, this way and that, winding and bowing, turning and gliding, but all the time fingering and blowing for dear life." Witness also the struggle between John Gray and the panther; Sister Dolorosa standing on the brow of the hill at sunset and

again in her window in the moonlight; together with the advance of summer and the play of butterflies (she described most beautifully in Summer is Ready). Indeed we have before us in Allen's works a series of pictures conveyed by words instead of pigments. The setting of his stories is in the Blue Grass Region of Kentucky, once the battle-ground for pioneer activity, now the land of spacious homesteads and broad domains.

The artist's medium for conveying thought is color. By his appeal to this same sense of color Allen demonstrates himself an artist. His pictures of landscapes and costumes are exceedingly fine. The mingling of the vivid and the contrast prevents lack of harmony in the whole. Again, the picture is just as we expect the real to be; as we have seen the real to be. There is an entire lack of studied arrangement and grouping in the picture. Nothing by its vividness or peculiarity shocks. Sound blends with color and we too long to hear "The old, old chorus" or to see Dolores standing on the hill watching the sunset. Allen's description of this is of great clearness and

wondrous beauty. Very pathetic indeed must have been the sight of the dying parson playing in imagination his beloved flute even as David under the elm played in his fancy Tom's violin. The effect of tone color is nowhere shown to better advantage than in his closing paragraph of "Aftermath." And who at the close of "A Kentucky Cardinal" does not feel "the long, long silence of the trees."

James Lane Allen proves himself an artist too in not crowding his stories with characters. He is not telling the story of a village or of a family but usually of one person. All that tediousness and detail which comes from a multiplicity of persons is lacking. His descriptions are therefore very clear-cut and concise. It is better to be a master of the few than the acquaintance of the many. This makes the personality of his characters stand out with great vividness, and impressiveness. There are passages where the omission of certain details seems to tell us of things too deep and sacred to be uttered. Allen has learned one secret of the successful artist, not to tell all but to let the

mind of the reader interpret as it may. How exquisitely he touches of Georgiana's death. Old King Stanyon too is brought to his coronation day and we are left to surmise the later life of him and Aunt Charlotte. Does Miss Walker marry? We never know. Were John Gray and Jessica each true to the very last? We suppose so. Nor can we tell with what reception Daphne and Hilary met when they returned home. We have an outline complete in itself but we are left to fill the details.

There are other little touches too which are of great beauty and tenderness. What a place of reverence the mantel becomes with its flute and violin. We can pardon the parson for making of it a shrine where his devotions were offered up for himself and for mankind. In awe and silence we watch Father Palmer hunt again in his dying moments the spot of blood upon the grass stained cord, and hear his only murmur, "Magdaline." But the best of all is the boy before the picture. He went to see "Sleeping Beauty" but like her of Lyphar, found the world's Messiah.

That same fast, rudely artistic though it was now, had once before condemned the Pharisees and broken Peter's heart, even as it now judged the boy.

Any reading of this Kentuckian which would fail to notice the striking figures would be superficial to a degree. He could not be said to be fond of figurative language, yet when he used it it is striking for its beauty and originality. Allusion is used often, metaphor occasionally. But it is in his similes that he is at his best. When Georgiana died Adam described the loneliness of himself and mother-in-law by saying: "We were like soldiers after a battle, the one of whom had lost a captain, the other a fast fellow." Dolores's sweetness during her solo was: "As the string of an instrument snapped under the strenuous touch of the musician." Again:

a. "the war had divided the people of Kentucky as the false mother would have severed the child."

b. "They, speaking of the colonel and his like, possessed only an antiquarian

sort of interest, like the stamped brick of Nebuchadnezzar."

"If Georgiana loved you she would, if bidden, reverse every law of nature for you as completely as a ring that you had caused to turn from right to left."

After trapping the cardinal Adam wandered to the hedge a "Land of Taranis" going to Damascus but from every tree came the old cry "per-se-cu-tat per-se-cu-tat thou, thou-me, me. Of Gray:

"The Scotch blood so slow to kindle like a mass of anthracite, so terrible with heat to the last ashes, was burning within him now with flameless fury."

And this is another picture of him:

"He could plainly hear immortality sounding like a muffled bell across a sea, now near, now farther away according as he was in danger or safety."

As examples of alliteration we have: "Silently summer noises;" "Winnowing wings;" "Blue billows;" "clean contact;" "Flecked faculties;" "Cruisers careening to one side;" "Red-ripeness" "Yellow sailed ships of summer."

In his appreciation and treatment of nature our author holds first rank. No other story writer of today lives so close or holds such intimate communication with her. His love is innate and keen. He might well be taken for a naturalist, so well and accurately does he describe the flora and fauna of the blue grass country. To him nature is not a mere illustration, nor yet an external conception, it is a part of his very existence as necessary as light and heat. His use of it is as varied as his objects. Now it is an analogy, now a part of some picture or again the potent factor in the universe. No story is exempt from these nature-touches. Yet the roses are always sweet and the skies do not diminish in brightness. His favorites seem to be among the birds, and how charmingly he tells of them! It was a bird that introduced Adam Rees and Georgiana McVey; and likewise Gordon Helm and the man. It was the flowers that gave these same people a topic for conversation. His wondrous love of nature is best shown in "Kentucky Cardinal" and its sequel, "Aftermath." It took all the power of Georgiana's love to

wean Adam from his nature studies; his garden and his wild red-bird. It took the power of her personality to keep him from them, and, when she died, back again he went to his old haunts and pursuits. The most striking point in this story is when Adam hastens to answer the request of his sweetheart and traps the red-bird, whose confidence he had worked so long and patiently to win. Strip these narratives of the birds and flowers and they would be as bleak as November fields.

The aesthetic and emotional qualities then seem to predominate in Allen, but never to such a degree as to completely hide the ~~intellectual~~. The intellect is always directive and controlling over the emotional, and the strong spirit, perhaps through this very restraint, pervades rather than cowspels. And this spirit is always sweet and hopeful, never cynical or gloomy, it leads on to the heights, never downs. And yet the ugly element is present. It is only handled with rare skill. The contrast between the selfish widow and her unselfish roomer and that between impudent

Tom and meek David are carried just far enough to enhance the beauty of such characters as those of the parson and the boy.

Furthermore in his handling of plot our author is most transparently direct and natural. He never seems to magnify or try to deceive. In the story here chosen as in a sense a typical one, there is in reality no plot. It is made up of two pathetic character sketches, so woven together that any attempt to separate them seems to mar the beauty. Events are not located in sequence yet we feel no shock as we read. We finish the tale of the parson's flute yet we feel the narrative incomplete till we hear about the boy's victim. The two simply introduce new human friendship into our lives and the old truth, of a love so deep that it fills with unconquerable fear and timidity, is brought vividly home to us as we sympathize with the boy David. The parson was so good and great and he so sinful and poor.

And so through out all Allens work we find these wonderfully delicate touches

out of the universal human heart. He has discovered for instance the all conquering power of love. Now, as in the boy it must combat and overcome a reverent awe. Now it has to strive against pride by vows as in Father Paleman in the "White Fawn", as in Sister Dolorosa. Again it overcomes local prejudices and gross faults as in Daphne in "Summer in Israel". The test of love is its endurance. "Love is not love that alters when it alteration finds". In these Kentucky stories love is ever triumphant. Paleman broke monastic vows, left the monastery which from childhood had been his home, and when the end came his associations said nay but love said yea and triumphed, as kissing the small blood stain he died murmuring with the last breath, "Madeline". In the "Two Gentlemen of Kentucky", during his dying delirium the colonel whispered:- "Helen, Helen! Will you break your promise **** I have brought you the pinks. Won't you take the pinks Helen?" From this little bit of the colonel's love story for Ellen Tells is no more, we know this, that years could not efface

the Helen of his younger days. Ive reared the masterpiece of Nicholas, drove Odessa to a distant land, made Daphne defiant, killed the poor cardinal and kept Plum Gray and Jessica true, though a thousand miles intervened.

Another exquisite touch is the absentmindedness of the clerical parson when he first felt Cupids dart. It is a fine combination of the pathetic and ridiculous which described the hapless parson running down the street and back again, nowhere yet everywhere, and all because of a widows kiss. It was this aloe which caused the undignified masquerade and dance, which in turn drove the borrowing boy away to become a thief. No wonder that in the end one of the parsons sermons should be on the kiss which betrayeth.

Many little incidents add greatly to the interest, as Davids imaginary slo, Tonis belief that the gravity of Jessi under the bridge of his violin betokened great skill, and Davids determination to confess when he saw his mother through the lilacs. The story of the

Flute and Violin makes the essence of love self sacrifice. Half a years salary is given to quiet the conscience of the boy, who in turn had to lose his precious violin for restitution. The sacrifice borders on the heroic. The other stories bear this out. Dolorosa and Palemon risked damnation, as they thought; Daphne, the ire of a father; Aunt Charlotte, her life all for the sake of others.

The whole work of Allen is saturated with the spiritual element. This makes his writing absolutely refreshing in this age of doubt and laxness. The love of his characters was the universal passion, yet some one was loved in particular. The love is for divinity and humanity. The presence of the one proves the presence of the other. They are complementary. Allen makes his loving people of great faith and faithfulness. Dolorosa, Palemon and the Parson, all sympathized with the poor sin-stained world the more after they had experienced human love. Probably the transforming influence in the life of Old King Solomon was the affection of Aunt Charlotte. All the leading characters appeal to us as intensely religious because they loved much, for the greater love we bear

the nearer we reach perfection since God is Love. This spirituality never appears mawkish or superficial. Never for a moment is the dignified devotion lost.

The author's sense of right is very acute and active, yet it seldom leads to moralizing. The characters and events are left to expose whatever lesson there may be. Not one word is spoken against the boy's theft in Flute and Violin. The writer does not condemn him, the reader does not; but the picture of the aggrieving Christ does. In "Aftermath" he gives me his views on dueling and in his two monastic stories he expresses himself very forcibly on the cloister vows. Notwithstanding the scarcity of sermons, the influence of his tales is potent. Every thing abounds in lessons which subtly enter the heart. This is not the method of the lyrical writer but rather of the dramatist who hides himself yet speaks powerfully through his characters.

James Lane Allen has undoubtedly taken as his theme: "Know thyself" then "Love thy neighbor as thyself." The majority of the sorrows and disappointments of the books

come from a mistaken view on the part of the characters of their ability and desires. How bitterly Pauline Cameron and Father Paleman had to sorrow because they decided on the ascetic life before they had seen the world or understood their own hearts. Old King Solomon Thorpe a cellar digger was of no use, yet when the moment came that he realized he had a duty he became the most important man in town and the hero of the hour. Adam could not see himself as Georgiana understood him. Colonel Fields did not know what he wanted so his later life was one bewildering maze. John Gray could not see that Cissy was not for him, but Jessica could, and the school master's blindness left one lingering regret and two desolate hearts

Allen's work is a beautiful and artistic presentation of lofty human possibilities. Every incident, because of similar capabilities and longings in all human hearts, leads to one conclusion;—the need of a higher altruism. The great love of Peter for his old master is pathetic but worthy the most noble soul. Sterling worth and tenderness

must have been in the heart of the old negress, to buy the liberty of such a debauched sot. And what royalty of spirit this drunken old King Solomon showed, when he, and he alone, dug the graves for the loved ones of those who loved him not, but who greeted him with jeer and scoff. And great was the sacrifice of Adam for his beloved Georgiana! How kindly Jessica treated John Gray junior all the years through, for the sake of his father, who had charmed her patrician soul.

Allen has been criticised because his stories "end badly." He like to see sacrifice and sorrow rewarded. He has left for others to picture the brightenings of life, he has chosen the pathetic. But should we call the passing away of a spiritual life mournfull? Is it not the true artist who mingles suffering and repentance with pleasure and contentment? Though he is sad, he is never gloomy. His pathos is ever hopeful. There is no trouble that love does not ameliorate here and immortality eradicate hereafter. Notwithstanding that the heros and heroines die, we know it is but to bind life and in more abundance.

It is this universality in sympathy that makes him a master. He combines skillfully the dark and bright, the ugly and beautiful, despair and hope. Neither is used to excess. There is perfect balance. The displeasing enhances the pleasing, while the pleasant rebukes the unpleasant. We have a well proportioned unit in which the humor is no less genuine than the pathos. We even find the ludicrous. Think of the sedate James Moore running hither and thither, as though to escape a swarm of bees, and all because of Widow Babcock's kiss. Or fancy the ridiculous picture as the coon delves deep into the feather bed, while the tidy housewife in her despair calls the village sheriff to arrest the offender. And very ludicrous Peter must have looked with a biblical commentary on the skirt of his coat, which itself was as variegated as that of Joseph.

Is Allen a genius? Yes. He has touched the world-heart by his portraits of single woodhearts. His universality makes his stories the heritages of the ages. Nor is it rough and rude, but that universality

polished by sterling personal worth and a rich scholarship. The test of genius is its long life. Allen's creations must live for they fill a place which none of no other writer have filled. They are the stories of all men in all times and therefore while man love his fellow man, relates his sorrow, shares his joys, these stories will live to make life brighter and better and prove James Lane Allen a genius.

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